

A Brief History of the New Testament Church

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The Church of Jesus Christ as an organization or body of people has its origins long before Jesus was born to Mary, but many look to the time of Jesus' ministry as the "beginnings" of the Church. In reality, the New Testament as a fully functioning covenant did not take effect until Jesus' crucifixion on the cross. That marked the ending or completion of the Mosaic law, and of the Old Testament.

At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, however, he recruited twelve apostles, or especial witnesses who would serve to preach his Gospel to the Jews and to the Gentiles (the World). While they were ordained during Jesus' ministry and prior to his crucifixion they preached, baptized and performed miracles of various kinds, but it wasn't until the day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, that they received an abundance of spiritual power when they received the Holy Ghost as they were touched with "cloven tongues of fire" as described in Acts chapter 2.

From this point the Apostles were able to move out in great spiritual power to preach and baptize, converting many thousands of people to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The people they baptized and converted were then numbered as part of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The spreading of the Gospel of Christ into the world profoundly impacted society and governments. The establishment priests that would not believe in Christ's Gospel sought to destroy this movement, which they deemed as heretical. This affected the relationship between the then-nation of Israel and its Roman occupiers.

Rome at the time was controlled by the Caesars. Gaius Julius Caesar was a general in the Roman Republic whose military conquests and political maneuvering had allowed him to be granted the title of "Dictator for Life" by the Roman Senate. Up to that time the Roman Republic had been in existence for nearly 400 years, and as such it was an established power in the region before Julius became the Dictator for Life. Although he somewhat shared power with the Senate, his policies drew severe criticism until, some years later, he was eventually betrayed and assassinated by two Senators. This betrayal led to a civil war within the Roman Republic, the outcome of which was that Julius' great-nephew Octavius, later known as Augustus, would eventually be given the title of Emperor by the Senate, and thereby becoming the first definitive Emperor of Rome. As the first Emperor of the Roman Empire Augustus proceeded to consolidate his power, virtually eliminating the governing power of the Senate. It could not remove him from power if it wanted to. The role of Caesar in government has had a lasting influence; for example, the Russian Tzar and the German Kaiser are more modern (though now unused) developments of both the concept and title of the more ancient Roman Caesar.

It was during the reign of Augustus Caesar that Jesus Christ was born. From the book of Luke in the New Testament:

Luke 2:1-5

- 1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.
- 2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)
- 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.
- 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)
- 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.
- 6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.
- 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

This "tax" served two purposes:

1. It collected money that Rome could use to maintain and build its empire, and

2.It allowed Rome to perform a census of the countries under its control which it could use to determine how best to maintain its control.

Besides military conquest, Rome had to maintain those territories that it had already conquered. To accomplish this, Rome designated regional kings and governors that reported directly to Rome. Additionally, it was Rome's general policy to adopt the religions of nearly every country they occupied, which resulted in widespread worship of many different and conflicting deities, but it maintained a secure hold on who ruled in each of the governed countries that they maintained. Among the Jews it had been a well-known prophecy that a new king would be born to a virgin, so when word came to king Herod, he ordered the execution of all male children under the age of two years. It was during this time that Joseph and Mary took Jesus into Egypt, where they could not be found by Herod's armies.

Matthew 2:1-23

1 Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

2 Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

3 When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

5 And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

6 And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

7 Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

9 When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

11 And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

12 And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

13 And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.

14 When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:

15 And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.

17 Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,

18 In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.

19 But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,

20 Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.

21 And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.

22 But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:

23 And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.

With the death of Herod, the fear of a new king in Israel who, by his birth, could usurp the authority of Rome was largely gone but not entirely forgotten. It was the claim of kingship that the Jews who condemned Jesus reported to Pilate - the appointed governor of Jerusalem - as reason enough to have Jesus executed (in an attempt to gain Pilate's favor). While this tactic ultimately failed, Pilate proceeded with Jesus' crucifixion not because of any claims that were made about Jesus, but because the Jews demanded it and would have caused larger problems if he had not allowed it. Even while the ruling Jews demanded Jesus' crucifixion, they still believed in this uniquely Israelite prophecy, one which the Israelites of the day still expected to be fulfilled in due time. What they wanted, instead of a peaceful spiritual leader, was a military king who could overthrow their Roman rulers and restore Israel to have the regional power it had once possessed under king David and his son king Solomon. This was not the kind of kingdom that Jesus preached about, so the rulers hated him for it.

The Roman practice of adopting every religion was paganism on a grand scale and was in direct conflict with the Christian religion. The Christian religion demands only one true and living God that is all powerful and possesses attributes no other worshipped deity held. The danger this posed to Christians of the day was that this religious belief was also in conflict with the political and semi-religious elevation of the Caesars to objects of worship and admiration.

When Christians came into contact with those of other faiths, the outcome was often terrible for the Christians. As a somewhat more pacifist group of people, the Christians of the day would refuse to worship other deities that others demanded them to worship. These demands often turned to imprisonment, torture and death. Many thousands of Christians died by being mauled by lions, by burning, by crucifixion, or by other brutal means. This is what happened to most of the first Apostles - death by torture and by execution.

The history of the New Testament Christian Church is often tied to Rome, and generally not for the better. Rome had its own internal political problems that had been grinding along slowly, problems that would eventually lead to its fall. The Roman Empire became too unwieldy for the government and its armies to maintain control of while political strife destabilized the government. As Rome encroached upon the borders of regions that had more capable armies they suffered their first major military defeats at the hands of the Goths (Germanic tribes) and others. The Roman Empire was already vast, including regions as far west as modern-day England, as far north as modern-day Germany, as far east as modern-day Iran (previously Persia), and as far south as Egypt.

In other words, Rome was too big to keep itself secure and too chaotically mismanaged to be stable. For the first time in its history Rome lost territory that it had previously gained.

Although the Christian religion was in conflict with Roman religions as a matter of definition, elements of the Christian religion were adopted into Roman culture because even Roman governors could recognize that simply killing their subjects could only end in revolt. As the Christian religion began to spread further into Rome, it was adapted and modified by Romans because of its positive elements, yet they retained many of their pagan beliefs. These partially converted believers, or in some cases subversive pretenders, introduced problems to the Church when they began to meet with the fully converted Christians.

The Apostle Paul had prophetically warned the Church that after his death there would be dark days ahead as a result of these infiltrations:

Acts 20:28-31

28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

29 For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock.

30 Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.

31 Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5

- 1 Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him,
- 2 That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand.
- 3 Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition;
- 4 Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God.
- 5 Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things?

From the time of Paul until the last Caesar (Romulus Augustulus) some four hundred years later the Church of Christ faced these trials and became diluted with beliefs and practices unlike what Jesus gave to the Apostles. The roles of apostles and prophets as advisors and governors of church affairs gave way to the bishops who became the regional church leaders that made decisions affecting the church as a whole.

As Rome began its decline, the modified Christian Church began to rise to power. During the reign of Constantine in the early 300's A.D. the diluted Christian religion was adopted as the official religion of Rome. It was also during his reign that the first Canon, or recognized collections of books that would become what we now know as the Bible, were assembled, which included both the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament and the mostly Greek New Testament. The seat of the Church moved to Rome.

The bishops that constituted the governing body of the church at the time met periodically to formalize their statements of beliefs and to regulate the affairs of the church as a whole. These "Council" meetings became the foundation for the newly identified Catholic, or "universal" Church, and marked a dividing line between the teachings, doctrines, and Gospel of Jesus Christ as compared to the accepted dogmas and creeds of the now-controlling Catholic church. The Church that Jesus organized could no longer be found as a body in any known country.

By the time of the eighth and ninth centuries A.D. the government of Rome transitioned from a secular government having a state religion, to being a state governed by a religious head formally known as the Holy Roman Emperor, Charlemagne. This "Pope" now possessed both state and religious control over a large territory, now known as the Holy Roman Empire. This was an almost complete departure from the original structure of the Church that Jesus Christ organized.

The Pope (whose titles include "The Bishop of Rome") held complete control over all other bishops in the church. His word became law in both the national and religious sense. The Popes consolidated power to themselves further by making decrees that fundamentally altered how people were to worship, mandating that all citizens must adhere to these laws at the risk of imprisonment or death.

Over the course of the next thousand years the Popes of the Catholic church were chosen by vote or in some cases by the murder of the existing Pope. Even nations that were not considered part of the Holy Roman Empire were still controlled by the Pope by virtue of his place as head of the church.

Starting in about the 1500's, however, sparks of rebellion against this rule began to kindle. This was the beginning of the so-called Reformation Movement which sought to correct the most obvious and diabolical errors in the Catholic church. Among these early reformers was Martin Luther, the Wesleys (John and Charles) and others. The term "Protestant" stems from the fact that these leaders and newly formed churches still considered themselves to be Catholic but were Protesting against the errors of the Catholic church. Indeed, the creeds held by these early protestant churches did (and still do) contain the words "...I believe in the Holy Spirit, *the holy Catholic church*, the communion of saints..." etc.

Many of these early Reformationists understood that what they were doing to correct the doctrines of the church was incomplete, a stepping stone of sorts until the church should one day be fully **Restored** to the pure and true original doctrines and teachings of Jesus Christ, and they looked forward to the time when this would take place.

These early leaders also recognized the many miracles and gifts of the Spirit recorded in the scriptures of the Bible could not be found in the modern church, and they recognized that this was because the church had lost its uniquely Christian qualities. Faith and grace became words that they understood had changed in meaning or had lost meaning, and while they recognized that this had happened and attempted to correct it, they realized that without the interventions of the Holy Spirit of God they would forever remain in a state of partial ignorance about these most important subjects.

However, even as they recognized these things they were reluctant to give up on much of what they had been taught. Disputations between churches increased until the early 1800's, when a movement in the northeastern United States began to develop which caused Christian-based churches to become competitive with each other not for the truth, but for membership. This shows that religious interest in the United States ran high but it was not very Christian in how it was conducted.

A Old Testament revelation given to the prophet Amos expressed a most important and relevant statement to the effect that when God works, he uses prophets to announce it.

Amos 3:7 Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets.

About this same time, a teenage farm boy in Palmyra, New York was concerned, as his entire family was, with which church they should join, knowing that the contentions they had were less about doctrine as they were about getting converts to their congregation. He took the advice found in the words of the Apostle James,

James 1:5 If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

He took that verse very personally and directly. He decided to pray and ask God to show him what the best way for him should be. He went into the woods not far from his home to pray for guidance where no one but himself and God could hear. As he did so he was first encircled with darkness, but as he began to pray the darkness was dispersed and a light shone upon him, brighter than the Sun. In his own words, "I saw the Lord." The conversation from that time directed him that he should not join any of the churches because they had all become corrupt and that they taught for precepts the teachings of men.

He was also instructed that in time he should be given the writings of an ancient people that had once lived in the Americas which would give another witness of Jesus Christ, and that he would be given means to translate them and to publish them, not for profit but to establish the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This person was Joseph Smith, Jr. Several years passed by before he was permitted to obtain the record and to do the work of translation. This work of translation was made possible by the gift of the Holy Ghost as he looked through interpreters similar to eyeglasses that had been provided along with the record for the express purpose of translating from languages of ancient date. He had several scribes who wrote what they heard him speak as he read from the records over the course of the roughly 90 days' actual time it took to do the work. By June 1829 the translation had been completed and a handwritten copy (called the Printer's Manuscript) of the original was given to a local publishing company who was able to complete the work in 1830. This book was published as ***The Book of Mormon***.

About the same time as the work of translation was taking place Joseph received further revelations from God in which he was given instructions about the Gospel of Christ, and how the Church of Christ should once again be established so that the people might be able to prepare for the latter day events to unfold as described in the holy scriptures.

As part of that process, God gave Joseph and others with him priesthood authority so that they might be permitted to perform the ordinances of the Gospel of Christ such as baptism by water, baptism by the laying on of hands for bestowal of the Holy Ghost, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, ordinations to priesthood, bestowal of blessings, and power to be witnesses of Jesus Christ as the apostles had done in olden times. With these tools in their hands they established the latter

day Church of Christ which officially and legally organized on April 6, 1830.

Church numbers grew very rapidly so that by the time ten years had passed by well over one hundred thousand persons had been baptized and joined the Church of Christ. Every organization that grows rapidly has growing pains and this Church was not different in that regard. While they faced opposition by other churches, that alone was not sufficient to cause problems, but often it is the internal contentions that lead to serious problems, and so it was that by the time of the 1840's very strict regulations had to be made within the church to prevent it from being destroyed from within.

In 1844, during a heightened wave of persecution, Joseph Smith, Jr., brother Hyrum and two others (John Taylor and Willard Richards) were targeted by an angry mob who killed the Smith brothers and injured John Taylor. The consequences of the death of Joseph and his brother Hyrum to the Church was nothing short of devastating. The ensuing months, days and years resulted in a splintering of the Church into multiple factions with various Church leaders assuming control of different groups. Brigham Young, one of the early twelve apostles in the Church, proclaimed himself the new leader of the Church by virtue of his position as one of the leading apostles among the twelve, despite multiple instances when Joseph Smith, Jr. had prophetically announced that his son Joseph Smith III would be the one to fill this role. Subsequently Brigham Young led a group out to Utah where they formed what is commonly known as the Mormon Church, or also known as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS for short reference). Young Joseph, as he was called, was only twelve years old at the time of his father's death, and many attempts were made by Brigham and others to secure young Joseph to their organization, but these all failed. Neither he nor his mother believed that the men presuming such authority were guided by God in doing so and he himself did not desire such a posting.

Some sixteen years later one of the groups that had not followed any of the presumptive leaders of the church, organized themselves as the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (RLDS). By this time young Joseph had grown to manhood and by his own experience with God chose to associate himself with the so-called RLDS Church. In 1860 Joseph Smith III was appointed as the President of the RLDS Church which then grew rapidly, presenting the Gospel as his father, Joseph Smith, Jr. had before him. Joseph Smith III's association with the RLDS church continued until his death in 1914 at the age of 82.

Following previous precedent as established by his father, Joseph Smith III designated the next person to follow him as the president of the Church of Christ, his son Frederick Madison Smith. In turn, Frederick M. Smith eventually appointed a brother of his, Israel A. Smith, and this was eventually followed in turn by the appointment of William Wallace Smith, a half-brother. The church had grown to over 200,000 members by this time.

In the years since the Reorganization the church had expanded into multiple foreign countries and had members in all of the United States. Testimonies concerning the power of God were well known to these early RLDS church members despite the persecutions experienced by the early Church in the 1830's and 1840's. The church had had been strengthened considerably by refocusing on and retaining obedience to the doctrines and teachings of Jesus Christ. With the resignation of William Wallace Smith from the presidency of the Church, and the subsequent designation of his son Wallace B. Smith, that began to change in dramatic fashion.

In 1984 the most divisive and damaging legislative document was presented to and approved by a general Church conference, one which presumed to be a revelation from God but which altered the way in which priesthood members were called and ordained. For all of recorded history in the latter-day Church and in the historical times of Jesus and further back into ancient Israel's past, only men could be called and ordained to the priesthood. The new "revelation" proposed by Wallace B. Smith proclaimed among other things that women could and should also be called to the priesthood. Those who rejected the idea that this document was divinely inspired understood that it came about not by revelation but by internal pressures to become more like other churches which did allow this and other practices.

The result of the general conference approval of this document was immediate and damaging. Church officials revoked priesthood licenses from thousands of those that had served faithfully in the priesthood, not for any wrongdoing but because they did not accept this new criteria for calling priesthood, and often they revoked licenses with no stated reason and without any trial as required by church law.

The church once again fractured. Members began meeting in homes or forming “**Restoration Branches**” where they could worship together and apply themselves to the Gospel of Christ as given in the scriptures without the control of what was often now called the “Institutional church.” Again, it appears that the church is seldom injured by those outside the church, but by those inside it.

Groups have continued to meet since that time with some attempting to form larger associations of congregations (known as branches) in the interests of regaining the organizational integrity once held by the Church before the events of 1984. In some cases, much as it was done in the time between the death of Joseph Smith, Jr. in 1844 and the Reorganization in 1860 groups have restructured themselves and appointed rulers and leaders, but just as often when that takes place there are other groups that disband or separate themselves due to the same issues that have caused problems in the Church since the beginning.

Time will tell how Jesus Christ will address these problems but it is universally recognized by all of these branches that it must happen because the prophecies in the Bible, the Book of Mormon and the book of Doctrine and Covenants all speak to this reality. It is commonly accepted among all of the RLDS or Restoration-based branches that Jesus Christ will one day return to restore all things to their correct order. When that happens Christ will reign on earth in the Zion of God - the embodiment of the kingdom of God - as a literal, physical and spiritual place for a thousand years as foretold in prophecies of the holy scriptures. Until that time our responsibility is to endure in faith to the end, always looking forward with hope and love, remaining steadfast and obedient to the commandments we have been given. In doing these things the Lord will take care of his own.

References include Wikipedia.com, Britannica.com, History.com, RLDS Church History volumes 1-4, An American Prophet's Record: The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith edited by Scott H. Faulring, the Memoirs of President Joseph Smith III, The Autobiography of Elder Joseph Luff, The Autobiography of Charles Derry, The Autobiography of J.J. Cornish, The Autobiography of Edmund C. Briggs, various interpersonal interviews, and personal knowledge of events in modern times.